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NUEVA LUZ
photographic journal volume 19:1

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December: El Mejor series, 2012. Archival pigment print, 34 x 14”

As En Foco’s 40th anniversary rapidly approaches, we’ve been experiencing this weird phenomenon of reflecting both backwards and forwards at the same time. Thinking of the successes and challenges, the incredibly talented and inspiring artists that have gone through the organization - we are also looking into our future, and how to keep this organization an energetic, breathing and living space, where artists are given an opportunity to grow and showcase their work.

How do we continue to revitalize our audience (that’s you!) We ask for your help and input in making changes in the coming year, and I hope that you’ll join us in being a part of that positive change.

Speaking of change and reflection, I want to take a moment to bring attention to something that our greater communities are experiencing.

As tension rises in Ferguson, Missouri with the murder of Michael Brown, the fighting in the Middle East continues, and the health of West Africans grow worse - I hope we can all take a minute to find a moment of calmness and peace - and then, get right back to the streets and rise up against systemic racism and against horrid living conditions in Gaza and Syria. Let’s send our prayers for the families, both Israeli and Palestinians, who are suffering so much loss. Let’s provide support to organizations such as Doctors Without Borders and other organizations who are doing their best to help fight the Ebola outbreak, and then let’s remember to honor, support and act within our own local communities.

There is a lot of work to be done in this world, a lot of inequality, pain and hatred that needs to be broken down - but I hope that together, we can fight the good fight, holding our hands and heads high.

You may cut me with your words,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I’ll rise.”
Maya Angelou, Still I Rise
This year’s awardees consider the power of place and the nature of connection and isolation. I felt enriched and informs by having come across this work. Some of the subjects, such as everyday women, costume characters at Times Square, and a seven-year-old girl, may seem familiar enough on the surface, but upon looking deeper we learn their intriguing human stories.

A child of Christian missionaries, Eyakem Gulilat was raised in Ethiopia, Kenya and parts of the United States before landing in Oklahoma. There, he found groups of Native Americans, German-speaking Mennonites, and descendants of free blacks who each had staked their claim to the land; he knew this would be the perfect backdrop to consider the relationship of place to identity. While an art student at University of Oklahoma, he was initially drawn to photojournalism but became interested in finding a creative practice that would allow him to tap into his personal experience.

In Mother’s Prayer, Gulilat’s beautiful, performative images use traditional dress, props and location to restage tableaus based on childhood memories in Nazareth, Ethiopia. Surprisingly, they are staged in Oklahoma where he still resides. His goal is to challenge what he calls “the authenticity of place,” to create a zone where borders and location are ambiguous. Part of the project’s success rests in the viewer’s preconceived notions. Can America resemble Ethiopia? How does this shift our perceptions of either place? Gulilat questioned how much to give away; upon close inspection some details like foliage and picket fences feel distinctly American. Yet, he has shown the work to Ethiopian Americans who have been fooled by Oklahoma’s rural settings. For those who are unfamiliar with Oklahoma and Nazareth’s landscapes, Gulilat’s photographs demonstrate how convincingly a place can be conjured within the imagination. The resulting effect is the surreal feeling of being in two places at once.

The landscapes are lush, the sky is generous and the images strike a note of serenity and simplicity. Many of Gulilat’s tableaus depict prayer or suggest spiritual contemplation. In one photograph, he re-stages a memory of his father deep in prayer, in another, he is inspired by the memory of his grandfather studying the Bible in the woods. Gulilat’s project also incorporates what he calls “the politics of clothing”: the act of wearing another culture’s clothes makes a person American or Ethiopian? He attempts to feel closer to Ethiopian culture by wearing special ceremonial garb throughout his performance in Mother’s Prayer. To many Americans, the style of dress seen here makes the work easy to categorize, whereas for many Ethiopians, the sight of traditional clothes is suspicious and unusual.

Gulilat says the project will end once he has photographed all of his memories of Ethiopia. Until then, his process in making this work draws his two worlds closer together.

Alan Chin’s photographs also explore the complex and enduring connections to one’s homeland. Chin’s photographs of his family village in Toishan, a rural province in Guangdong province, depict a largely forgotten world that is rapidly disappearing. What is remarkable about Toishan is that nearly two-thirds of overseas Chinese hailed from this tiny region during first half of the twentieth century, their dialect and cultural traditions, distinctive and indecipherable to other Chinese, the prevailing concept of Chinese identity whenever they travelled. Chin’s great-uncle left for Cuba in 1927 and arrived in New York in 1935, Chin’s father eventually followed, finding work in laundromats or family-run restaurants. The aftermath of the Second World War and the civil war between communists and Chinese nationalists made it nearly impossible for emigrants and their descendants to sustain lasting connections to their mother country. Thus, Chin’s project fills an important gap in the personal histories of millions who recognize Toishan as an ancestral home.

In 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson’s Immigration and Nationality Act made it possible for wives and children reunite with loved ones in the United States. Chin’s own mother and older siblings reconnected with his father after nineteen years of separation. Chin, who was born in New York in 1971, considers himself a “reunification baby.” He first visited Toishan at the age of eighteen with his parents, but he learned the Toishanese dialect while growing up in New York. Over the course of his many returns to the region, he has been welcomed as an insider. Through his work as a photojournalist he has chronicled history in dozens of countries, but capturing his homeland has become a priority.

Through this project he has shown how China’s wealth has not been experienced equally. Despite the image of China as a booming economic powerhouse, rural districts like Toishan suffer from a combination of poverty and depopulation. Toishanese gravitate toward bustling cities in search of opportunity. A high percentage of the elderly population are left behind, some support themselves through informal economics. Chin’s photographs of overgrown shacks, unpaved roads, and abandoned homes reflect the result of hundreds of years of departures mixed with state neglect. Compared to other regions of China where buildings are razed with regularity, Toishan’s crumbling buildings have been untouched for hundreds of years. Descendants such as Chin and others have played a crucial role in keeping the village’s municipal services afloat: Toishan’s only railroad (now defunct) was funded by overseas Chinese and many school and hospitals operate solely under overseas donations. As global demographic trends predict a massive shift toward cities, the fate of Toishan is a cautionary tale for small towns and villages everywhere. In tracing his family’s history, Chin brings their experiences forward into a larger context–the phenomenon of massive emigration.

Joana Toro’s project, I Am Hello Kitty, shows another side of this story. Toro was a photojournalist who worked on daily news for newspapers and magazines in her native Colombia before deciding to move to New York in 2008 to learn English and to try her hand at in-depth, self-assigned projects. Upon arriving, she found her work options were limited without a command of English. When a roommate introduced her to the world of costumed street performers she found her next job and her next project. She started dressing as Hello Kitty for seven hours a day every weekend for more than a year. Soon she was photographing the informal community of mostly undocumented Latin Americans behind the masks. Visitors to Times Square recognize the fleet of characters that greet tourists and children but far fewer will be familiar with the people behind the masks. Without a common language or working papers, the performers experience considerable vulnerability. In recent years, the street performers have been subject to public scorn but Toro wanted to show they were not criminals. Between the long hours on her feet, the need for persistent
In one image, a woman glowers at Toro through the eye of her mask. In others, we see the performers in Toro's weekly meetings Toro now photographs. The group comes together to study the issue, meet with police, and participate in workshops. For Toro, who stopped performing last spring, the group’s meetings have given her an education in American civil rights. She finds the group’s shift from fear to empowerment a beautiful transformation.

Although Keller observed that El Carmen’s women didn’t ordinarily think of themselves as strong, she feels their self-perception began to shift the longer she lived and worked with them. Her relationships deepened and her observations on visual culture can be found at www.cultureeculture.com and on Twitter @makerthinker.
How does our memory influence our present interaction with an unfamiliar environment? How do we interpret a new place, and what is the connection between our memories and the present?

The gap between my present self and my childhood mirrors the geographical separation between my physical location in America and my childhood home in Ethiopia. I have struggled to describe for others a heritage and homeland I have long been distanced from. My desire through the project, *Mother’s Prayer*, is to make sense of these gaps and to rewrite my narrative into the current landscape I inhabit.

The images are rooted in what I remember most growing up in Nazareth, Ethiopia in the 1980’s. The traditional Ethiopian clothing helps illicit a response within me and a visual cue to scenes from my childhood: women carrying firewood, men chewing khat, children playing soccer, and believers uttering prayers. The clothing acts as a time machine, transporting me back to my childhood where I am playing with tires or looking for a lost friend. I re-enact my memories using my current location as a backdrop. The result is a surreal aesthetic that challenges the authenticity of place. Where are these photos taken? Who is out of place here? Is this home?

Behind a mother’s prayer is a very wishful and well meaning desire for her son. This project portrays the nostalgia one feels for home, but also the nurturing and hopeful connection one has to the land he or she inhabits.

Eyakem Gulilat
Eyakem Gulilat
Untitled, Mother’s Prayers series, 2013. Archival Pigment Print, 16 x 20"

Eyakem Gulilat
Untitled, Mother’s Prayers series, 2010. Archival Pigment Print, 16 x 20"
Eyakem Gulilat

Untitled, Mother’s Prayers series, 2013. Archival Pigment Print, 16 x 20"
Eyakem Gulilat
Untitled, Mother’s Prayer series, 2010. Archival Pigment Print, 16 x 20”

Eyakem Gulilat
Untitled, Mother’s Prayer series, 2014. Archival Pigment Print, 20 x 16”
Eyakem Gulilat

Originally from Ethiopia, Eyakem Gulilat’s work is rooted in a quest for belonging. Gulilat focuses on the complexities of cross-cultural encounter, perceptions of time, memory, and place. Gulilat obtained a BA from Abilene Christian University and MFA from the University of Oklahoma. He was selected as an artist in residence at the Center for Photography at Woodstock, New York and at Newspace Center for Photography in Portland, Oregon. Gulilat has won several awards including the Oklahoma Visual Arts Fellowship and the National Photography Fellowship Competition at Midwest Center for Photography. Along with the Arts and Humanities Council of Tulsa, he is a recipient of the 2012 National Endowment for the Arts grant. He was selected as an awardee for En Foco’s New Works Photography Fellowship Awards #18, 2014-2015.

www.eyakem.com

Daniel Jackson
In Korea we have a saying: ‘naughty seven year old’. We think a child of six or seven is at their most mischievous, which is when I started photographing my niece, Yeonsoo.

This process of observation required much delicate care. It was a fragile journey into the life and heart of a most unpredictable and sensitive girl, into her relationship with those around her: her family and friends—although they remain unseen in the photographs—and also into my own childhood. It came as a surprise for me to see how this little girl managed to express herself and react to the world. It took a while for me to understand that a kid has character that hasn't quite settled down yet, so her emotions are erratic, being the sweetest girl in one moment and bitter or outrageous in the next. Her experience of the world was very limited by her young age, which translated to her relationships, especially that of her mother. And yet, a kid’s imagination is unlimited; they can be anybody they want to be.

Nowadays, Yeonsoo is going to school. A period of transition was inevitable, which means moving from the family setting to the societal setting of school. She has started learning how to live with others, and this has brought much laughter and tears as well. Young kids are like very soft clay or sponges, which become harder as they find their direction.

Beyond my interest in her, there is also a reciprocal relationship between us. Looking at her, I often felt as if I was looking at myself as a child. It has allowed me to meditate about how I came to be the woman I am today, and indeed what sort of person I’ve become.

Hye-Ryoung Min

Artist Statement

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Hye-Ryoung Min
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Untitled, Yeonsoo series, 2014. Archival Pigment Print, 24 x 29.6"
Hye-Ryoung Min
Untitled, Yeonsoo series, 2014. Archival Pigment Print, 24 x 29.6"
Hye-Ryoung Min is a South Korean photographer living and working in NYC. Most recently her work was selected in the Center Forward at the Center for Fine Art Photography, the 20th Juried Exhibition at Griffin Museum of Photography, the AHL Foundation’s Camera Lucida Revisited exhibition, the Family exhibition at the Detroit Center for Contemporary Photography, and 88th Annual International Competition’s Semi-finalists exhibition at The Print Center. She was also invited to The FotoVisura Lodge Artist Residency. She also received Conscientious Portfolio Competition award, honorable Mention in Fine Art at the International Photography Awards and a Seoul Photo Festival Portfolio Award, and was a Rising Artist Award finalist and at the Seoul Museum of Art. Her photographs have been shown at several venues in NYC including COOA US Art, hpgrp gallery, John Jay Art Gallery, Greenwich House, ASMP Gallery and Photoville in Brooklyn. She has participated in exhibitions at The Center for Fine Art Photography, Griffin Museum of Photography, MASS MoCA and Detroit Center for Contemporary Photography. She has exhibited internationally at the Seoul Museum of Art(SEMA), Gallery LUX, Gallery COMMA, Sejong Art Center, UNESCO Gallery in Seoul. She was selected as an awardee for En Foco’s New Works Photography Fellowship Awards #18, 2014-2015. www.hyeryoungmin.com

Since 2011, I have returned to El Carmen, a coastal town in Southern Peru, each year. I have photographed the people there in their daily lives, working on the farms, celebrating important events, and most important of all, while I photographed, I was a part of their lives too.

During this time, I had the opportunity to get to know many of the strong women in this community. The Afro-Peruvian women of El Carmen are the inspiration my latest project, The Gladioli of El Carmen. The gladiola is a delicate flower that originated in Africa but was also a symbol of the strength of gladiators in Ancient Rome. This combination of delicacy and strength comes to life through my viewfinder as each woman presents herself as she wishes in her most familiar environment, her home.

In August of 2007, a devastating earthquake hit this community, leaving 80% of their adobe homes destroyed. With the help of different organizations, many houses have been rebuilt with brick but many have had to try and make due with what remains of their homes.

When I asked these women to be photographed, I felt that they have built or are in process of building, their own personal landscape with strong character and determination at the same time as El Carmen is rebuilding itself as a community. I am determined to make these women more visible because they are the true centers of their homes and this community.

Angie Keller
Angie Keller


Angie Keller is a Peruvian-American photographer. In 2011, after 16 years of teaching Spanish at a university level, she decided to solely focus on photography. While teaching, she studied photography at Missouri State University’s Department of Art and Design. She has always been passionate about traveling, and always with a camera in her hands. She was selected as an awardee for En Foco’s New Works Photography Fellowship Awards #18, 2014-2015.

www.angiekeller.com
Artist Statement

Being an immigrant is an enormous city is a challenge. This series provokes a reflection on the status of Latin immigrants in US, their ways of cultural appropriation and new identities, and ironies of immigrant life, living in the margins of a globalized world. I am Hello Kitty is the result of a personal journal to find my new “identity” – viewing right through an eye hole in the head of my Hello Kitty costume while I ask for donations after posing for pictures in Times Square. Though it stems from my own experience, it is a representation of those who face similar struggles of becoming their new selves in the United States.

Joana Toro
Joana Toro is a freelance and self-taught photo-journalist and documentary photographer based in New York City. She was born in Bogota, Colombia. She worked as a staff photographer with the major magazines and newspapers in her native country. Toro has traveled since 2009 making her own photographic projects that have been published among international media. She recently published her first monograph Masked (oodee, London 2014). I am Hello Kitty series was featured in The New York Times in 2014. She was also a winner in Latin American Photography Collection, American Photography 2012, a finalist in the PAPTI Gabriel Garcia Marquez Iberoamerican photo contest in 2010 as well as the winner of Photography Cultural Heritage Colombian Ministry of culture in 2009.

Joana is 2014-2015 member of Guild, and is contributor in Redux pictures. She was selected as an awardee for En Foco’s New Works Photography Fellowship Awards #18, 2014-2015.

www.joanatoro.com
Although I was born in the United States, Toishan is my ancestral home. I speak a local dialect of Cantonese that is incomprehensible to the rest of China.

Toishan is a county of a million people in Guangdong Province, southern China. I have been photographing there since 1989. At first glance it looks like many other areas: a few gleaming buildings and factories, multi-lane divided highways, McDonald’s, new cars and well-dressed pedestrians. It seems to exemplify wealth and economic growth. Behind this facade is Toishan’s peculiar history. Until the 1960s, two-thirds of all overseas Chinese, like my family, originated from this one small region. It was poor and over-populated during the 19th century and very close to Guangzhou, where the foreign powers first penetrated China. Thus it was a fertile recruiting ground for the “coolies” who built the American transcontinental railroad, and for the generations who emigrated to become restaurant workers and laundrymen.

The lives of the Chinese in the diaspora diverged radically from those of our relatives back home: Politically and culturally, mainland China disintegrated and rebuilt itself in paroxysms of murderous totalitarianism and then unabashed capitalist reform.

But, the more time I spend there, the more it begins to feel like some kind of home, illusory as that might seem. Despite the persistent poverty and the vast chasm between my village of Gongmei and my life in New York, I can foresee a time when Toishan might become like Tuscany, a picturesque region rich in history and architectural heritage, a vacation getaway. For now, though, it is still part of the forgotten rural China, engulfed in a crisis that is quiet but sustained.

Alan Chin
I talked about minority stereotypes and parody in my previous essay. Now I want to explore the perception of the female and male bodies in a pluralistic society. I will deal with the former first.

The body is a constant presence in the history of art, its precise, calibrated composition an emblem of exactness, the universe in miniature, evidence of a rigorous, calculating mind overseeing all natural design. A robust torso, well-rounded breasts, the crevices in a face, the protuberating veins navigating an erect neck—the Greek taught us that human anatomy is about frailty but also about control. Each of us housed in a body. Precision, flawlessness, excellence aren’t permanent. Like everything else, the body changes and the brief, fleeting moment in which it finds its balance is called perfection.

That perfection is best appreciated in nudes. Nothing is between them and the pathos of life. Those nudes become paradigm of beauty. Not only the trim profiles of young women we are constantly exposed to by the advertising industry, but also the obese bodies of Rembrandt in all their excess. Nudes are sensual because we see the body as is, frail, pure, without subterfuges, nature at its prime.

But not all bodies are equal and neither are all nudes. That is a lesson drawn from diversity: beauty is gender partial and color drive. White and non-white, male and female aren’t seen as equals. The white female body is portrayed as voluptuous, susceptible, an object to desire and a prize to cherish. For centuries the eye of the beholder has been dominantly masculine, and white women are represented as passive: what matters is not what they think (that is left to man) but how they look and who they are. Beauty is aesthetic judgment organized into a hierarchy of taste framed in a specific time. Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz, a sly, broad-minded convent nun at the end of the seventeenth century, accused men of exploitation. She confronted men with a conundrum:

If your passions are so strong
that you elicit their disdain,
how can you wish that they refrain
when you incite them to their wrong?

The conundrum is unavoidable in a multiracial milieu. Pluralism, unavoidably, is about conflicting viewpoints. This means that female bodies are filtered through the prism of racialization. While every group showcases its own preferences (blacks love blacks, Asians love Asians…), yet the devotion to whiteness as supreme model reigns above all. In contrast, the non-white body is seen as brute, unpolished, ominous. I have a close friend from El Salvador, a savvy 45-year-old woman with a third-grade education. She cleans hotel rooms for a living.

“...
Having come from absolute poverty, she now owns a house, drives a Honda, and saves money for her grand-children’s college education. She wishes she had white skin, she says, “so I could be attractive.”

Not surprisingly, the history of the white female body in photography is plentiful. Always seen through a male lens (the lens is neutral, yes, but not its owner), women surrender themselves in poses signaling availability. The non-white body, instead, is more restricted. It distills exoticism, even aggressiveness. A few examples to ponder. The first is by the Brazilian artist Valdir Cruz, whose oeuvre focuses on the faces of the aboriginal people of the rainforest, is a master of the non-Western faces. His portraits of Yanomami women resist any infusion of eroticism. Look at them and then turn to Gypsy Woman (1991): the slim girl’s expression—hers is a rustic look—oscillates between puzzle and anger. Her eyes are not quite looking at us—she sees above the horizon—and her limbs are tied. She is beautiful in dangerous ways. We can’t forget she’s being photographed by a man older than her. Perhaps that is why the girl personifies treacherous susceptibility.

Another point: the gypsy woman observes us as we observe her. Who is scrutinizing who? This is a feature of most portraits: the protagonist looks while being looked. This retroaction engages us in a dialectical game between puzzle and anger. Perhaps that is why the girl personifies treacherous susceptibility.

Likewise, Cruz’s gypsy woman is feminine in surreptitious ways. Her anger is palpable; it is an essential feature of her beauty. She doesn’t play by the rules: get to know her intimately and you’ll be trapped. Juxtapose her to the Bronx-native photographer Lauri Lyons’ combative Afrolicious (2006), with a hearty black model, and you have a study in divergence. Afrolicious is pictured as defiant, her pose about femininity and blackness as engines of pride.

She is woman subverting objectification, an artist (she holds a bunch of paintbrushes in her right hand) whose tools are weapons. Her posture, her alto hairstyle, her attire, including her bracelets, the abundance of clothes on the sofa and hats on the wall, the leopard look of the carpet, the sixties portraits of men on the wall—the entire composition is done as kitsch. The message is clear: authenticity in the non-white female body is only possible through sabotage.

The fact that Lyons is taking the picture is essential: a non-white female body is depicted by a non-white female photographer. Not that this ingredient might solve the power struggle between the observer and the observed: one is inevitably in charge of the message while the other a conduit for that message. Still, the struggle, it could be said, seeks a point of rectification: women looking at themselves, without the intrusion of men.

The true rectification, of course, comes with women photographing men. And with non-whites picturing whites. Only then do we attain wholeness. For what makes democratic pluralism inspiring is its irresistible need to test limits. The female body is a test case: forever a subject of fascination, the question is always how each generation looks at it anew. Some things never change; others never remain the same.

For what makes democratic pluralism inspiring is its irresistible need to test limits. The female body is a test case: forever a subject of fascination, the question is always how each generation looks at it anew. Some things never change; others never remain the same.

Ilan Stavans, one of today’s preeminent essayists, cultural critics, and translators is Lewis-Sebring Professor in Latin American and Latino Culture and Five College-Fortieth Anniversary Professor at Amherst College. His books include Spanglish (2003), Late and Language (2007), and Gabriel García Márquez: The Early Years (2010), Return to Centro Histórico: A Mexican Jew Looks for His Roots (Rutgers, 2012), and the graphic novel El Iluminado (Basic, 2012, with Steve Shinkin). He is the editor of The Poetry of Pablo Neruda (2003), Becoming Americas: Four Centuries of Immigrant Writing (2009), The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature (2010), and The FSG Books of 20th-Century Latin American Poetry (2011), and guest writer for Nueva Luz volume 101 (2004).

Valdir Cruz was born in Guapuava, in the Southern State of Paraná, Brazil in 1954. Although Cruz has lived in the United States for more than thirty years, much of his work in photography has focused on the people and landscape of Brazil. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1996 for Faces of the Rainforest, a project documenting the life of indigenous people in the Brazilian rainforest, during the years of 1995-2000. In 2000 he was granted by the Guggenheim Foundation a publication subvention to ensure publication of Faces of the Rainforest – Yavanimi in a book format. Cruz is represented in the permanent collections of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, and the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., among others. He is represented by Throckmorton Fine Art, Inc., in New York City, and Bolsa de Arte de Porto Alegre in Brazil. Cruz shares his time between his stu- dies in New York City and São Paulo. www.valdircruz.com

Lauri Lyons was born in the Bronx, New York and traveled globally with her military family. She earned a BFA in Media Arts from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. For many years Lauri worked as a Photo Editor for several national magazines and organizations, including The Source, B.E.T. Essence, and Magnum Photos agency. Lauri's photographic range has enabled her to shoot celebrity portraits, ad campaigns and documentaries. Her photo- graphs have appeared in publications such as The London Observer, Stern and Art Forum. She is the first Black woman to shoot the cover of Fortune magazine. She is also the co-author and acclaimed books, Flag: An American Story (2001) and Flag International (2008). She was the com- missioned portrait photographer for the book INSPIRATION: Profiles of Black Women Changing Our World (2012). She is also the Founder & Editor in Chief of NOMAD5, an online travel media platform. www.laurilyons.com